



**OLIVER JACKSON**  
**Untitled (5.20.83)**  
1983  
oil on canvas  
72" x 108"

# OLIVER JACKSON

## ON MAKING

BY DIANE ROBY

"When paint comes into its own as paint they want to call it abstraction," says Oliver Jackson. Abstraction is a cultural term useful for defining the look of things, but it is of little use in painting. "The conceptual aspect of the term is at odds with the physical aspect of making the work," he explains. "It's the effect that counts and it's determined by the materials—matter acting upon matter upon matter." The artist probed the mechanics of making and consciousness during a series of conversations in his Oakland, California studio in August 1996.

He points to a separation between makers, who deal with concrete reality and "culturalists", who apply a conceptual stance after the fact in a reduction of experience that "leaves 'making' as limited as the cultural argument." To formalize a term such as "abstraction" sets up parameters that obscure relationships between the viewer and the thing—"trying to make a process that is dynamic stand still."

Jackson contends that the schism between abstraction and representation is a false dichotomy. The act of making anything involves abstracting, taking things out of a larger context for a specific transmutation—but the result is not necessarily an abstraction. The term usually carries implications of nonrepresentational as a definitive aspect, but the use of referential imagery can equally be said to be an abstraction—"from images to make images, a metamorphosis that uses aspects of a thing to make a *thing*." It is a tremendous abstraction to render in two dimensions—according to artistic conventions that have come to be recognized as realistic or representational—an illusion of a many-dimensional reality that we associate with the physical world. Conversely, works that are nonobjective appear superficially to be based not in the reality of the world, and so they are said to be abstract, although what they convey may be absolutely concrete and familiar.

Making is a process that utilizes one's full consciousness and the tools of the craft to give correct form to something that has no specific visual form. The maker, in the formation, must at all times be attendant to what is required in order to bring the thing into being, so that the thing made is absolutely correct in and of itself. "You have to stay on your toes every time—you cannot know it ahead of time," he says.

To categorize Oliver Jackson's paintings as abstraction is to deny the fullness—and absolute concreteness—of a visual realm of paradox and flux that asserts the coexistence of contrasting views of reality. Jackson's paintings reveal potent worlds as resonant as they are unfamiliar, fluid states of being that fully assume the interaction of earthly and cosmic forces. In composing, he provides points of convergence that invite passage from the world outside the painting to an interior world that overwhelms in its vastness. It is a place of experiential effect, "a kind of exuberant space where the space itself is a force. Form is that in reality which affects you. There is a tendency to think of form as an entity, not a force. When form is a force it is elusive—but space is form and it is the kind of thing that has no parameter or shape."

Jackson's paintings never deny their physical essence. Form and matter—the stuff of paint—unite in a seamless oneness that defies separation into component parts. Structural elements lock in tightly and yet remain in ambiguous flux. Through a series of mechanical effects, Jackson sets up experiences that move the viewer in ways that are not measurable, as the work "gets past the eyes to a place where there are no words." Anxiety or disorientation give way to an openness of perception, as the experience demands to be taken on its own terms; a powerful alternative to a gravitational reality that keeps us fixed to the earth. "You have to approach with an openness of mind and heart, to allow the experience to work you on *its* terms without trying to exercise control over it."

Jackson's understanding of his craft has developed over 35 years of rigorous application. In the late 1960s, he began to organize his canvases along a grided structure, marking out a central axis and other key points in the composition. This became a way for him to approach the painting from the start as a dynamic entity, removing the anonymity of the inert surface to set up a possibility of rhythmic relationships. "I wasn't oriented too well, and needed to do that in order to understand a kind of field relationship. It was a question of mechanics, to activate the surface and to be activated in a more clear way by the canvas itself." He laid his canvas on the floor in the early 1970s, a re-orientation that forced a different reading: approached

from any direction, it gave the sensation of looking into a space that opened up in new ways. The surface moved from static ground to energized space, potent and demanding.

## THE CONVERSATION

*There was a big transition that occurred in your work in the late 1960s and early '70s...*

I had gone to Africa, and it was there that I realized that you could do anything if you could understand the materials well—you had to understand the materials very well. A marking system is just a marking system: brushes, sticks, knives, it doesn't matter. I had started to fumble around before then with added materials, but was limited in the way that I understood it, which was in an additive way. That approach was a conceptual one that had little to do with making something. In the process of making, "adding" something is not important. The question is: Is adding a necessity? If so, that's how it's done. I wasn't freed of the concept of "adding" or the concept of "marking" because it had been removed, in the way I was taught, as though it were something in itself rather than the means to an end. For instance, the word "collage" is a kind of making. In Africa, there's no such word that I know of as "collage". There are just things that have certain things that comprise what they are. So if you can get past a concept like "collage" then you're not "adding", you're using the necessary materials to make something that needs to be made in that manner.

The need to classify threw me, because it's like trying to sort it out and not understanding the tools well, apart from what had been said by people who didn't know a lot about tools. Their disciplines had made them compartmentalize things to analyze them. In making, the analyzation process is very different. One is analyzing, but not necessarily compartmentalizing, in order to arrive at one thing. Where they're disassembling, you literally are assembling. Now if you use the word "assembly", they will say "assemblage", which is again an isolation of a making procedure in order to identify and categorize it, which has nothing to do with making the thing. The thing is what it is, and how it gets to be what it is, its necessity to be a "thing". How it operates as a thing is entirely different than how it came to be a thing. That's the kind of misunderstanding you encounter in the way you are trained. You tend to get trapped in the procedure, in how the thing comes to be, as though that defines what the thing is as an active thing, and you miss your real objective. The maker must be strict as to whether or not the relationships that are being built are adequate. You can't rely on conceptually knowing that

you're putting things on the canvas or making marks. That doesn't get you through it. So that's what I understood, looking at the approach in Africa in things that were being made, and it was very exciting.

Once I realized that the understandings I had were confusion between concept and making, I could focus—that was *the* one. That freed me to become intimate with the materials—see what they can do and what they can't do—rather than just being aesthetically attracted. The aesthetic attraction is, "Boy, I like those." That's a different thing, but the intimacy of what the materials permit is another kind of relationship. And you can certainly sort out the difference between "liking" something and whether it is effective or not for an objective.

You may, in the process of making something appropriately, come to find that the aesthetics that are the result of a right relationship you learn to like. That's real freeing, and it makes you doubt your taste. You know, "good taste", whatever that is, or "developed" taste or acquired taste is just that—acquired. It certainly has its place, but it may not be useful for what is being made. So you have to be open to not having "taste" as such but having a keen set of eyes for your objective and the rightness of the relationships. You shouldn't be so prejudiced about what they "should" be, in terms of "liking" them—you should be absolutely rigorous about the rightness of them for the objective. It requires that you become intimate while you're making something, that you have to pay attention to the materials. That's what I mean by intimacy.

People frequently don't think that paint is a material—it becomes an aesthetic. But you have to pay attention to paint. It is a very rigorous material. If your objective is a kind of thing, then the use of paint is demanding—how it will be used, what it lends itself to get there.

### *How did you come to that in the paintings?*

I already had preferential thematic material, that stuff that's close to your heart. In my case, there was strong sentiment associated with the image. So I had that information, and a sense of format—how it should be seen, let us say. But I couldn't really use it well until I was freed of rather standard understandings of thematic material. In other words, I deal with figures a lot, it's comfortable for me. I can think visually fairly well with the use of figures as a basis for visual thinking. When I say visual thinking, it's like concretizing something so that it can be seen. That something is very difficult to explain, but the figurative imagery seems to suit it, it satisfies me. The point was to make it authentic—for the reference to be one-to-one to my sentiment.

In other words, the gestural image is fairly commonplace, but where you place it spatially, the weights and balances, mass, volume, etc., is what makes it unique for me. The set of relationships of a figurative image, if I'm going to use descriptive or naturalistic description, how do I relate it? If it's not going to be descriptive, how do I relate it to get to this particular thing that I think—I know—is affecting me? That's a real challenge.

What I had to learn was that I was not making people, and the references were not people under any circumstances. It wasn't close to a person, in the sense that a person is an entity in our kind of reality. I had to keep that in mind, and so I call the images 'paint people'—the anatomy is totally paint. That was a way for me to stay clear. What I learned is to keep a painting a painting, and all the marks in it are marks in a painting, and all the images no matter how referential, no matter how much others respond to them and say that they're "like" reality in air, space and time—they are not. I must remember that they are paint and the effect on a viewer is arrived at by mechanical means. ...

Vermeer understood well how to make a painting even though the descriptive imagery is recognizable to a degree that people want to argue about its authenticity, in terms of what's in our space. They are being effected by a set of mechanics in paint, and tend to find comfort in relating it to a world that makes it easy for them. Rembrandt can do the same thing — give maximum descriptive imagery but exceed it in terms of the real effect, so that the visual language is not limited to illusionism or references.

In making, that is very difficult to hold on to, because this society is so oriented to "just like"-ism. It prefers referential knowledge to stand in for real experience; it is not about the thing on its own terms. You have to work against that in order to keep making a painting. People think that if you're not representing, then you're making "Abstraction", missing the mark that the thing in front of them is concrete. It is not an abstraction, it is an aggregate mechanical process to make this one thing, and it is as concrete as the work that has referential possibilities. In many cases work that is nonrepresentational, or relies very little upon descriptive exactness, and work that is descriptively intense, are very similar in their ability to take the viewer to places where there are no words, where description or analysis of the work by referencing it to the world doesn't make any sense at all. It is rarely admitted that the use of what we call image frequently is not what the thing actually does to you.

One must avoid the tendency to make a work to be read and understood as though it were a verbal language or a 'code' that translates and makes known what the *significance* of the work is. As far as I'm con-

cerned, the experience is the result of a thing and yourself, and the significance is dependent upon the visual senses.

*To what degree does the maker condition the experience for the viewer?*

You can resonate them with craftsman mechanics that can be used to organize the relationships to put the viewer, when it's visual, into a particular frame of experiencing. The specificity of the experience—no. It is filtered *through* them. The generality of the experience—by the light, and mood—you can do that easily. If you want to excite with experiences that are fresh, then you can accomplish a frame, a mode, with another set of relationships that will frame the person in a particular state of being. If it is fresh, that is, not culturally known, you can make them experience without conceptualizing for awhile.

This culture is insistent upon making equivalents. If you look at Greek tragedy, you see this problem of making a new experience dealt with in an extraordinary way. The audience knows the story well. It's a common story, culturally, so it gives a comfort zone immediately. It is the specificity of the development of the tragedy that gets the person every time, by building a power that explodes the comfort zone. In other words, the dramatist must punch through the comfort zone of "I know this story" and therefore uses all of the techniques of language—metaphor, imaging, conceptual reference, rhythms, sound—in a way that the level of comfort, which makes the viewer feel in control of the material, is literally swept away and they experience anew, so a catharsis is possible. In an African American church the same thing is done. A commonplace text is chosen that everybody knows, and the thematic material is solemn, or ironic or whatever. But the development of the sermon is the making of a piece in which the power level must be strong enough each time to make the experience absolutely new.

That is one of the things that "the arts" are accused of — of being almost insidious in their ability to undermine your stability and make you experience without guideposts, while appearing to give you guideposts—in other words, making you walk into an arena with joy and cheerfulness and in a sense naiveté, and then pulling the rug out from under you. The point is to make you experience with a freshness that you cannot associate, and by association deny the experience.

In this culture the denial of experience is extraordinary, in the translations and stand-ins and so-called "decoding". They don't look to the work to do anything—it is supposed to refine an exterior life, but not change an interior life. In changing an interior life



**OLIVER JACKSON**  
**Untitled (6.8.89)**  
1989  
oil paint on gessoed linen  
96" x 96"



**OLIVER JACKSON**  
**Untitled (4.15.86)**  
1986  
oil on linen  
95 3/4" x 108"



**OLIVER JACKSON**  
**Untitled No. 2**

1976  
oil enamel on  
cotton canvas  
110 7/8" x 103 1/2"

you have to leave the individual to himself or herself. You have to trust that the work will do its job even though you don't know quite how it does it—you know it does it.

Every exchange that we have with the world, regardless of whether we call it spiritual or not, is through the world, by the senses, absorbing things in things, exploiting things by things, always relationships with things. This understanding in composition has fallen on hard times, because it is a craft that requires that out of many you make one, and that the one is more than the sum of the parts. The parts cannot explain it as a thing, even though one can know how it came to be a thing, but not what it is *as* a thing—and that's the difference. When a person understands that, then they will not try to take the mystery from the thing, even though they may understand the mechanics that led to how the thing came to be. The operation of a thing is forever a mystery. It is only in being this one thing out of these aggregate parts that the person experiences it, and what one experiences is not the aggregate parts or the necessity of them for it to be a thing.

It's very much the same for a human being as an entity, apart from the component parts, down to cells and DNA. Each one has an integrity, but what we call ourselves is something that must have all these integri-

ties working to the something. What is the something? We call it "I-ness"—the way we project ourselves on other things that makes us distinct from other things, even though we're like other things. This kind of thinking seems to be a bit too subtle. The society doesn't like this constant dissolving of a thing into a thing, while maintaining the integrity of its uniqueness. The cell has a uniqueness and an independence—while you have an independence, it has an independence. This kind of paradox is what is not liked. The hierarchical set of relationships that are developed, as we move upward, tend to deny the force of the foundation. In other words, if DNA is the code for all living things in terms we think of as living things, animate things, and its intention is clear to itself, it must be a stunning set of relationships. However, you would be hard pressed in this society for people to give it a spiritual thrust. If they did they would talk about God, and thereby wipe out the paradox we live with, of how one thing can support another thing, remain one thing, and the other thing *be* a thing, a consciousness in a consciousness—that's a bit much. So there's a tendency to take DNA and make it a kind of mechanics that one can't disprove, but one will make shallow its force as an entity and only recognize the entity, let's say, of a human being as special, but not the DNA. It appears too lowly.

When you make relationships in a work, you have to find as best you can those relationships that lead to a oneness, and that is esoteric. You're making a painting, but it is made of things, and they have to cooperate for oneness, an indivisible effect. That's an interesting concept to think about, but in the making process it is *always* the point.

A painting by its name is *a* thing. But any maker knows that it takes many things, and *all* of them are crucial. The relationship you have with this bringing together of material to make *a thing* which will give an experience which is not material in the same sense that *that* is material, requires that you know how to compose the materials so that they make relationships which are not materials. In other words, a relationship is an effect that is the result of bringing material things together. For instance, if you want to make illumination in a painting you can do it in many ways. You can use red and make the sensation of illumination. It is still red simultaneously, but the effect will be illumination, and not necessarily red illumination. At the same time it can be mood as an effect, but it is always this peculiar relationship with something else, never alone. So it is a mystery to talk about this ambiguity. It is ambiguous because it is not one thing only—its realm is ambiguousness.

To have precise effects upon you as a sense organ, to resonate you, the ambiguity of the effect must be focused sharply but at the same time not pinned down by any definitive reference. It must be focused so that the experience is not vague. You can see that in the use of, say, red with blue, you can make an effect that in mood agitates, and is still red and blue. Simultaneously one sees red and blue but the anxiety is not red and blue. It is anxiety, and they occur together. It also may be illumination, it may also be space, these things that occur together; it also may be volume or mass. All that may be given simultaneously and you don't lose focus in terms of a state of being, in that the experiencing of these simultaneous effects reinforces a precise state of being. In composing, you try to become intimate with the materials so that you can make relationships do these kinds of things. You can be familiar with the physicalness of the materials—the red is a kind of physicalness, the substance of paint, the support, it is all a kind of physicalness. All these physicalnesses are different, but they all play you physically so that you get an intimacy and begin to experience the material's ambiguity. Conceptually it is ambiguous.

You have to be careful about terms that are distracting. For instance, "texture" is the separation of an effect that always occurs with something, never separate but it occurs in your mind as a word, a separate thing—that is an analyzation process. So these are the



OLIVER JACKSON  
Untitled (9.12.91)

1991, oil on canvas, 8' x 8'

difficulties that a maker will confront because there is this constant separating out of an effect like "texture" from a "thing". When you have texture you have made a thing, always. If it has an effect of roughness, it is a thing that is rough. The word "texture" makes you assume that it is an abstraction or a concept. It is not. In that it is sensed it is a thing. What is necessary to understand is what it does to you.

Analytical reasoning that is superimposed on visual language causes complexities for makers. Africa helped me to see the integration taking place without the conceptual baggage, so that I paid attention to whether or not a cohesive *thing* was made. As a maker I could see that it was possible to use what the heart desired as tools or things to make something. You could say, "Well I always liked dirt. It's okay." And you didn't have to explain it to be culturally acceptable—it was just stuff you used. I had come to understand intimacy, and was freed from concerns about legitimacy and trying to find compatibility in making. In other words, you want to use earth with what to get where? So you're not arguing for the right to use it, you're trying to find out how to make relationships that yield something that one can experience.

*When these effects combine to create a cathartic experience, people want to make a leap back to say that your process is a cathartic process...*



**OLIVER JACKSON**

**untitled (1.1.93)**

(right canvas of triptych)

1993, oil paint and collage on gessoed linen, 9' x 9'

That's another way of trying to make someone responsible for the experience besides you: the thing, and the experience which is not the thing. Experience is something that is not the painting but arises between you and the painting. It is an extraordinary thing, and your senses are involved. Experience is a thing in itself, but the kind of thing it is denies isolated definition. When one talks about experience one always, to make sense, wants to reference it to what causes it in time and space. Yet the experience itself is a thing, the painting is a thing, you are a thing. Again, the culture doesn't train you to be comfortable with experience. It demands that the experience must have *meaning*, it must tie in with cultural reinforcement. It will not permit experiences that are overwhelming to be without meaning, nor will it permit the thing to be the basis of the experience. Therefore, the maker is held responsible for the experience and the meaning. This is absurd, because the maker is the maker, the painting is the painting, and the experience is the experience. Each is a phenomenon.

*How does the experience of a painting become known to you in the process of making?*

The painting will inform you at a certain point and it will lead you and you have to follow. The relationships will let you know what is not right, what is right. It is a process that can be frustrating but it is so accurate

you have to become intimate with what it is you've put down. It tunes you for making, so that when you put another relationship down, it may not work and you feel it. This feeling will almost make you sick. It will bother you, literally—it's like something distasteful in your mouth. And your eyes will like it and it is distasteful. It's very visceral for me. I suspect that's true for a lot of makers, it will be almost visceral, and they will argue for it. It's beautiful aesthetically, and they will argue for it mentally, conceptually, however viscerally it bothers them, and that is a clue that is brought through the eyes. Literally you are resonated.

The leadership of the work is reverberating you in the making process so that you are being led, and given good clues, and when it works you can go on, and go on more. It's so straightforward. It's like a game—you make the right move, you go on with the game. You don't stop and say, "Hey, I made the right move!" The game proceeds—it makes possibilities. That is as close as I can get to it, but personally, it will bother me. Sometimes I will have one relationship and it's adequate but not right, and then just like that I will find the correct harmony, and that's wonderful.

I think that's the rigor that haunts you. Whether it takes weeks, or days, or minutes, it is rigorous, and also humorous. The business about "spontaneity" is kind of a joke. Because things come quickly they call it spontaneity. It's ridiculous—how it comes is not the point. If it comes over a period of 50 years and it's right it will seem spontaneous—it will seem harmonious and effortless like your arm to your shoulder. Being able to act out of faith—that may be a better statement than spontaneity, which gives the idea of that which comes out of nowhere. If you work a long time in any field, what looks like spontaneity is just an absolute intimacy with the materials, and that you can have faith. You have this extraordinary faith.

Once you break through it puts you at odds. I'm not trying to be at odds, I'm trying to make a powerful thing. They think I'm an artist, a maker, who is trying to make a niche, that the work is unapproachable, and on my terms. That's not true, it's on the painting's terms, on the sculpture's terms, it's on the terms of the thing. I know that to be true.

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Diane Roby is an artist and writer in San Francisco who for many years catalogued Oliver Jackson's work. She has taught drawing at San Jose State University, written for *Artweek* and other publications, and was assistant editor for a forthcoming monograph on Manuel Neri to be published by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.